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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the changing state of the distance education environment, characteristics of distance students in higher education and their problems in using library resources and services. Information literacy instruction as the key role of distance education librarians is described based on a case study on Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University's (STOU's) experience in Thailand. The paper concludes that distance education librarians have much more critical roles to play in supporting the distance education system in the new learning environment. The question remains as to whether they will remain merely information providers as in the past or whether librarians as facilitators of other people's learning should take a proactive roles in the changing context as instructors of the information literacy skill or partners in the teaching/learning process to create information literate distance students. As a result professional public awareness of librarians as educators and faculty status of librarians as equal to teaching faculty will be enhanced. (Contains 22 references.) (Author)

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## Information literacy instruction to distance students in higher education: librarians' key role

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***Abstract:***

*This paper describes the changing of distance education environment, characteristics of distance students in higher education and their problems in using library resources and services. Information literacy instruction as the key role of distance education librarians is described based on STOU's experience in Thailand as a case study.*

Change is the key element for the twenty first century that poses many challenges and enormous pressure on our daily life, work and society. Political, economical, social, and technological environments are changing significantly and rapidly. Information and communication technologies (ICT) transform all aspects of education and distance education which is a rapidly growing segment within higher education is affected greatly.

Faculty and librarians are all at the crossroads and being pressured to increase their productivity and to change instructional strategies to accommodate changes and educational reforms. There is a need for the new vision and the new roles of librarians within the changing distance education environment.

**What is the changing distance education environment?**

Distance education has been moving very fast from correspondence education to online education or web-

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based delivery of education. The Internet and World Wide Web broaden the scope of conventional distance education to *any where , any time* and *any pace*. New types of educational technologies are emerging at an ever-accelerating pace. The integration of new types of educational technologies allows flexible learning, increased potential for interaction and access to a wide clientele and the global market. The growth of distance education worldwide and in Thailand is remarkable as technological development, globalization, and massification bring changes to the educational environment that alter the traditional educational system and structure.

Learning in the twenty first century is significantly different from learning in the previous days. Learning is considered to be learner – centered, a lifelong process and the means to cope with continuous or radical changes. Through distance education learning opportunities, access to higher education is provided with no boundaries of space and time. Distance education has widen its scope to include online education, online courses, virtual courses, virtual library and etc. Learning becomes more self-directed, collaborative, intertwined with personal life and work, and more resource-based, calls for perpetual access and usage of information and learning resources. Learning shifts from *know what* to *knowing how*, how to learn, how to secure information, use it, and how to relate to a changing society. The new emphasis will be on access and usage. (Thomas 1995:54) . Information and communication technologies has virtually the characteristics of the learning environment, paving the way for the new environment, new learning strategies and the emerging new learners, new teachers and new librarians.

**What are the needs and problems facing distance students in using library and information resources and services ?**

Distance students' characteristics are different from students in traditional universities. They are generally adult learners, mature, employed, and have family responsibilities. They have higher motivation and are willing to take responsibility for their own education. Their goals are often more clear cut. Distance students are self-directed, study on independent basis. They learn in a variety of ways and take control over their learning. They often experience a feeling of isolation and remoteness from other students.

Distance learners access to library and educational resources and services in various ways. Access can be directed e.g. face to face, or mediated by printed material, e.g. manuals, brochure, or mediated by technology, using a variety of media such as telephone, voice mail, web site, email. Successful direct access is characterized by flexibility, reliability, availability, user-friendly, portability, efficiency and service ability.

Library services are essential support services to distance education students. Most researchers in distance learning are in agreement that library support is a key element.(Caspers, Fritts and Gover 2001: 130) Distance learners expectations of library services as revealed in the literature, demonstrate a great need . ( Niemi, Ehrehand and Needly 1998: 69) The library needs of distant learners are not unique; they have the same library and information needs as on campus students.(Dudgan 1991;Rodrigues 1996). Apart from the manner in which they are accessed, requested and delivered, the same resources are required, the same questions are asked, and the same quality of service is expected( Rodrigues 1996); and they expect the same level of library service as that provided to their peers on campus.( Riggs 1997) Effective and appropriate services to distance learning communities may differ from, but must be equivalent to those services offered on a traditional campus .(ACRL 1998)

They frequently find the following problems in using library resources and services. (e.g. Angel and Budnick 1986: Cavangah 2001: 153; Cooper and others 1998)

- their institution may not offer a library service ; they may face delays and expense in contacting the library or there are many barriers that students give up trying to use it.

- their library expectations are often low.
- they lack information literacy skill , they frequently do not know or do not find out what services and resources are available or how to access them.
- they frequently possess inadequately knowledge and experience in library research, electronic informational resources, and technology in general.
- they may never come on campus so that they rarely receive information literacy training and are unable to use in- person assistance from librarians.

**Why information literacy is important to distance students in higher education?**

Information literacy which was developed from library instruction has been the term most frequently used since the late nineteenth. Information literacy is considered a survival skill for the new century, the key competency for independent study, self-directed learner, lifelong learning, and the foundation of a literate society. Information literacy is important to student achievement and considered a desirable outcome of higher education. (Lance and Potter 1995: 126)

Information literacy competencies are desirable for all graduates. Through information literacy, the other literacies can be achieved.(Breivik 1991) Many studies, research reports and articles (e.g. Al-Qullaf 2000; Bruce 1997; Clyde 1997; Rader 1998) theorizing and describing the importance and needs of information literacy skills and instructions. However less research has been done on information literacy instruction to distance students.

Information literacy becomes more important in the escalating complexed environment:

- *the information environment*: e.g. the information explosion, unimaginable expansion information, proliferating information resource, unfiltered formats and multiple media of information, diverse, abundant information choices – in the academic students, in the workplace and in the personnel lives of individuals.
- *the technological environment*: e.g. rapid technological change; increase dependence technology for daily tasks.
- *the educational reform environment*: e.g. pedagogical methodologies transform by the focus on educational reform ; some new pedagogical strategies including resource- based teaching/learning; project -based teaching/learning; research – based teaching/learning ; outcomes – based teaching/learning

**Should information literacy instruction in higher education be the key role of distance education librarians ?**

The many changes in the society especially in higher education and distance education environment present numerous responsibilities to academic librarians and have given them opportunities to take more central roles in the distance education process. The educational roles of academic librarians are expanding especially in teaching library/ information skills. The ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries) (1998) *Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services* delineated the elements necessary for institutions of higher education to support the distance learning program and to meet the needs of the faculty, students and academic support staff. The *Guidelines* assumes many important precepts which shape the roles of librarians and the management of distance learning library services. For information literacy, it is said that:

> *The instilling of lifelong learning skills through general bibliographic and information literacy instruction in academic libraries is a primary outcome of higher education Such preparation and measurement of its outcomes are of equal necessity for the distance*

*learning community as for those on the traditional campus.*
(ACRL1998)

Librarians' roles in teaching information literacy skills among distance students and independent learning program have produced a considerable amount of literature. Involvement in building information literacy skills is one important role even in the online environment. Edwards(2000) in his article *Librarians and online education* presented various roles librarians can play and need to be actively involved, including building information literacy skills into the teaching material at the design stage.

Librarians can contribute actively by providing distance learners with various forms of information literacy instruction for effective use of library and information resources and services and ensure that students are made aware of their critical role and importance to their learning. Some formats of information literacy instruction include face to face, workshops, credit course, booklets, printed materials, videotapes, cassette tapes, CD ROM s, online courses, web-based courses, and other innovative methods using technology.
The ACRL *Guidelines for Instruction Programs in Academic Libraries* (2000) identified various modes of instruction :

> *These may include, but are not limited to: advising individuals at reference desks, in-depth research consultations, individualized instruction electronic or print instruction aids, or group instruction traditional or electronic classroom settings. The mode(s) selected should be consistent with the content and goals of instruction. Where appropriate, more than one mode of instruction should be used in recognition of the wide variety of learning styles of individuals.*

Faculty members and librarians share roles in helping students acquire information literacy skills effectively and become information literate. The ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (1998:1) stated that *to be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information.*

Librarians have been seen as partners with faculty members in integrating information literacy in higher education curriculum. (Adalian 1997; Carr and Zeicher 1987; Shillinglaw 1995) The development of information literacy is purported to be especially successful when librarians develop partnerships with faculty members and as partners, incorporate information literacy programs into the academic curriculum. (Amstutz and Whitson 1997) Emerging critical roles for librarians include working with academics to ensure appropriate inclusion of information seeking in courses offered in flexible delivery mode; seeking out membership in course development teams. (Austen 1998)

**STOU 's experience**

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) is the eleventh state university and the largest distance education university in Thailand. It organizes its courses into four levels: master's degree, bachelor's degree, certificate and continuing education levels in various fields of study. STOU has devised a multi media distance education system "STOU Plan" to enable students to study independently without having a conventional classroom.

The undergraduate program comprises of instructional media: tutorial sessions; practical experiments for certain courses; study and independent research and intensive training sessions. Textbooks and workbooks which are mailed to students are the main media; support with audio cassettes, radio and television programs, produced in conjunction with printed materials and other audio-visual aids.



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Organization of STOU graduate programs is based on the distance education system which enables students to study independently by themselves under the guidance of instructors with whom the students may arrange appointments for educational consultations. Many academic activities for graduate students are arranged including orientation of new graduate students, academic seminars, intensive thesis courses, independent study courses and professional experience training.

STOU is internationally recognized and has received numerous awards. STOU's success comes from its high concern for quality assurance. The library plays a significant role in enhancing the quality of distance education programs and is one key indicator in quality assurance. Library and educational services are provided to STOU faculty members, academicians and distance students at the central level by the Office of Documentation and Information (ODI), at the regional level by the ten Area Resources Centers and at the provincial services with the cooperation of the Department of Non-Formal education, *STOU Corners* are set up in public libraries in every province throughout the country.

The information explosion in the past century has create the information revolution and the information society. STOU has been improving its distance education system with **STOU Plan 2000** to cope with changes in information and communication technologies and education reform in Thailand. The role of the library in distance education grows in importance, as the system is more resource -based and technology-based leaching/learning. Consequently the role of librarians in supporting the distance education system becomes crucial. STOU librarians play many important roles. In addition to information providers, they are also instructors or instructional partners, to assure that graduates from the university are information literate persons.

Information literacy skill instruction presented a different challenge. Various modes of instruction are provided for distance students both at the undergraduate and graduate levels as part of the study skill for distance students so that they can be effective independent and self-directed learners and importantly information literate persons. However, there is no research or follow- up study shows whether this is successful; or whether which mode is more effective, or meet distance students satisfaction.

At the undergraduate level, print and non-print instruction aids are widely used, e.g. brochures, pamphlets, students' manuals, videotapes, radio and television programs, the library website. A unit on library usage was included in the foundation course "Man and Civilization" for all students. However, since the academic year 2003, the new foundation course "Life Skill" will replace the "Man and Civilization " course. Information literacy skill will be included in this new course. In addition, many subject courses also include units or contents related to library research; information retrieval; information sources, access and usage, e.g. report writing, research technique. Information skill instruction is also taken in the as part of an orientation session which is organized for the new students around the country, and as a session during the professional experience practicum at the university before graduation.

At the graduate level, information literacy is more needed as STOU graduate system is different from undergraduate system. Graduate study system is more research-based and resource-based teaching/learning. Print and non-print instruction aids are also widely used by undergraduate distance students. Special instructions include e.g. CDROM about library use and information skill prepared by librarians and distributed to all graduate students for self-study; advising individuals or in group; information consultant; library -based research consultation; reference assistance. The links between distance students and librarians are also vitally important. Librarians are also invited to give special lectures in information skill to distance students in research and thesis writing. This is as part of a collaborative effort and partnership between faculty and librarians.

Information literacy instruction to distance students at STOU was delivered mainly through traditional

paper based and audio visual materials. In the synchronous learning environment, this should be adopted for the online environment. As there has been a revolution in the electronic resources available to off campus students, the World Wide Web and associated technologies are more focused in the context of changes in teaching and learning environment to virtual situation.

**Summary and conclusion**

Academic librarians' roles have been transformed due to changes in the society, many new developments and revolutionizing educational environment, introduced by information and communication technologies. They play important roles in the changing new environment. Key points emerging from the literature review show that academic librarians perform an in dispensable function in the educational process.

Distance education librarians have much more critical roles to play in supporting the distance education system in the new learning environment. The question remains as to whether they will remain merely information providers as in the past or whether librarians as *facilitators* of other's people learning should take a proactive roles in the changing context as instructors of the information literacy skill or partners in the teaching /learning process to create information literate distance students. As a result professional public awareness of librarians as educators and faculty status of librarians as equal to teaching faculty will be enhanced.

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